



YOUTH AND DIGITAL DIVIDE: A STUDY AMONG THE COLLEGE STUDENTS IN ASSAM

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Abstract: The digital divide has emerged as an important issue impacting several different groups worldwide. The paper attempts to study the problem of the digital inequalities among youths in Assam. Drawing from Max Weber's theory of social stratification and relying on primary data, this article examines how socio-economic status affects youth uses to the various digital devices in Assam. The findings reveal that socio-economic status, such as social class, parent's income, and occupation, thus affects how youth access various technologies and the Internet.

Keywords: Youth, digital divide, Assam, Max Weber, socio-economic status

INTRODUCTION

In the past few decades, the way in which we communicate, socialise, and work has been transformed by the field of information and communication technologies (ICTs). This global communication revolution began in the 1990s and continued with the expansion of wireless communication, made possible by ever-improving mobile phone connection and capacity (Castells, 2010). Thus, ICTs, including the Internet, smartphones, various digital technologies and social media, are essential to contemporary society, fostering innovation, economic development, and social transformation. However, with the increased advancement of ICTs, one of the most significant challenges the world has been experiencing is the challenge of the digital divide.

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In the contemporary period, the digital divide is a significant challenge affecting various sections of people worldwide. Furthermore, despite being frequent users of various technologies in the contemporary period, youth are mostly affected by digital inequalities. Although various scholars (Singh & Vimalkumar, 2019; Tewathia et al., 2020; Devara, 2020; Ray, 2024; Singh et al., 2013), have significantly discussed the affect of digital inequalities on Indian society, there is dearth of study among the youth in Assam. This article thus aims to fill this gap by addressing the problem of the digital inequalities among the youth. Drawing from Max Weber's theory of social stratification and based on primary data, this article examines how socio-economic status impacts youth usage of the Internet and other digital technologies in the context of Assam.

CONCEPTUALISING DIGITAL DIVIDE

As mentioned earlier, digital inequalities have been one of the most challenging issues affecting many sections of people worldwide. Since 1990s, the term became popular (Van Dijk, 2020; Ragneeda, 2019). Van Dijk (2005, 2006) argue that the gap in accessibility to data across people, communities, and even nations, including computers, smartphones, and the Internet is known as digital divide. Similarly, Di Maggio et al. (2001, p. 310) argue that the digital divide "refers to inequalities in access to the Internet, the extent of use, knowledge of search strategies, quality of technical connections and social support, ability to evaluate the quality of information, and diversity of uses." Thus, the term is used in the context of access and uses of the Internet and the emerging inequalities related to accessibility. Furthermore, it also examines issues of economic disparity, educational opportunities, geographical areas, and inclusion within society.

There are three levels of digital disparities that scholars have examined recently. In the first level, the primary emphasis is on the disparity between those with and without access to the internet. (Di Maggio et al., 2001; Van Dijk, 2005, 2020); the second level focuses on digital skills or having the capability to utilise a range of digital tools, notably the Internet (Hargittai, 2002; Van Dijk & Van Deursen, 2014). Moreover, the full utilisation of digital technologies is examined in the third level (Ragneeda, 2017). Similarly, to engage in various activities in contemporary times, one must possess this knowledge or be able to use digital technology efficiently. For instance, Van Dijk and Van Deursen (2014) argue that lack of familiarity with digital tools has a social dimension

that must be adequately addressed, especially given the varying social positions of individuals. Similarly, Ragnedda (2017) argues that digital skills are related to education, socio-economic status, prestige, and class. Similarly, Van Dijk (2005) states that the lack of digital connectedness involves more than just a lack of access to technology, which is a complicated and diverse problem. Thus, the disparity is characterised by inequalities in the availability of the Internet and digital devices, also the required skills to use these tools.

YOUTH AND DIGITAL DIVIDE: THE INDIAN CONTEXT

The issue of digital inequalities has grown in prominence in India in the last several years, affecting millions of young people, especially those in rural regions and economically disadvantaged groups. Many studies (e.g. Devara, 2020; Tewathia et al., 2020; Singh & Vimalkumar, 2019) have shown that different socioeconomic groups in India have different levels of technological access, proficiency in digital media, and other factors contributing to the digital divide. Despite India's rapid technical advancement and widespread Internet usage, social inequality persists, preventing equal opportunity and resource utilisation. However, with the proliferation of ICTs, digital inequalities have emerged.

A recent ASER (Rural) 2023 report shows that only 9 per cent of all youth have personal computers or laptops in their household (ASER Centre, 2024, p. 52). Such limited access to personal computers and laptops highlights how youths, those living in remote regions in particular, are excluded from the use of digital devices and acquiring digital skills. Hargittai (2002, p. 2) refers to this exclusion as second phase of digital divide. While online learning resources are more readily available to urban youth, young people in rural areas face obstacles, including inadequate technologies, poor infrastructure for digital communication, and insufficient internet connectivity.

MAX WEBER'S THEORY OF SOCIAL STRATIFICATION

Within social science, Max Weber is among the most influential social theorists. Max Weber's social stratification theory is useful for examining the digital inequalities among the youth. Social stratification refers to the hierarchical structure of a society's social groups (Stolley, 2005). Thus, social stratification classifies individuals into separate groups, often leading to disparities in opportunities and resources. Beyond Karl Marx's emphasis on economic class,

Max Weber offers a multi-faceted approach to studying social stratification. Max Weber posits that social stratification results from a complex dynamic involving three separate but related factors: class, status and power (Ragneeda, 2017; Weber, 1978[1922]; Neves & Mead, 2018; Ragneeda & Muschert, 2015). For instance, Neves and Mead (2018, p. 49) argue that Max Weber's theory of social stratification connects the meso and micro and macro levels of study by linking the significance of technological usage or utilisation with social processes, structures, and consequences. While these factors influence one's social status, they do so in their unique ways and overlap and interact with one another.

Ragneeda (2017) argue that individuals' socioeconomic status (class), position in society (status group), and power all have a role in shaping digital inequalities since these factors are embedded in the social structures. Furthermore, social hierarchy and structure reflect the unequal allocation of goods and benefits caused by social inequality. Consequently, the digital gap is impacted by the unequal distribution of these resources, which in turn affects internet access (Ragneeda, 2017). In this context, Max Weber's stratification model posits that power, status, and class all interact to shape people's social positions. Adding social status and political influence to economic considerations, Weber broadened the definition of class to reveal the complexities of the social system (Ragneeda, 2017; Ragneeda & Muschert, 2015). This highlights the multifaceted nature of social hierarchies prevalent in our society. Therefore, the cause of the digital divide among youths can be more clearly understood through Max Weber's concept of social stratification.

METHODOLOGY

This study has employed a mixed-method design, thus integrating qualitative and quantitative methods. For the quantitative method, an online survey using Google Forms was used, and it was distributed among college students. For the qualitative method, semi-structured interviews and focus groups were conducted based on a questionnaire among the college students. Participants were asked about their socioeconomic status, particularly their parent's annual income, occupation, and social class. Participants were also asked about their uses and access to the Internet, their use of smartphones, their experiences using 4G and 5G enabled sim networks, and the issues they faced in accessing the Internet.

This study was conducted in Bongaigaon College and Bijni College in Assam. Bongaigaon College is in Bongaigaon district, and Bijni College is in the Chirang district of Assam. The data collection took place during September and October 2024. For the online survey, random sampling was incorporated, whereas purposive sampling was used for the in- depth interview and focus group. Participants were purposively selected based on their language proficiency, age and socio-economic status. From the online survey, although 350 responses were received from the Google form, due to incomplete responses, 82 forms were rejected. A total of 268 samples has been accepted and analysed. For the semi-structured interview, 20 youths from both colleges participated.

Furthermore, for the focus group discussion, a total of 6 groups consisting of 6-8 members in each group participated. Participants were 17-23 years old and were pursuing their higher secondary and bachelor's degrees. Data from online surveys was analysed quantitatively using Microsoft Excel, while data from in-depth interviews and focus groups was coded, transcribed, and then patterns and themes identified. Pseudonyms were used in this study to maintain the confidentiality and privacy of the participants.

FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

Class and Digital Divide

Social class has been one of the important factors affecting youth access to the Internet and various digital technologies.

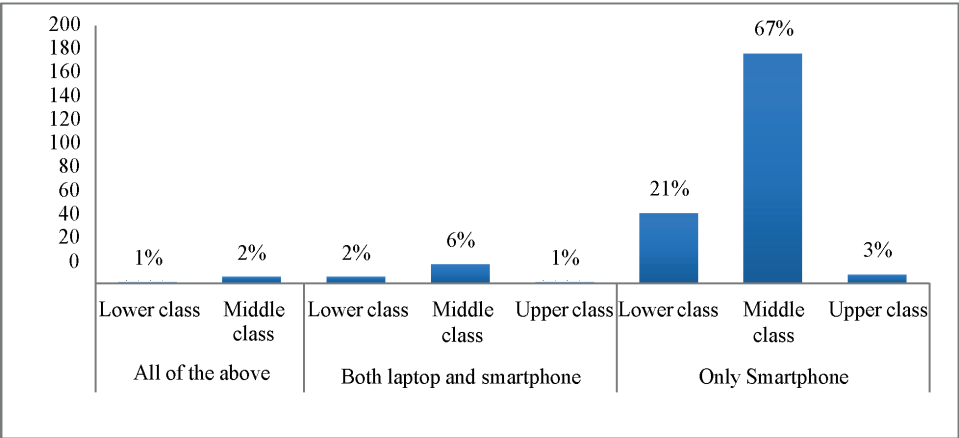


Figure 1: Social class among the youth and access to various digital devices

Source: Author’s calculation from the online survey

Figure 1 shows the youth's class categories and possession of various digital technologies. About 67 % of middle-class youth possess only smartphones. Meanwhile, about 6 % of

middle-class youth possess both laptops and smartphones. Among the youth from the lower class, only 21 % have smartphones at home. However, among the youth from the lower class, only 2 % possess laptops and smartphones.

Ratul Das, an 18-year-old student of Bongaigaon College who belongs to the lower class, describes his experiences using smartphones for online education. When asked about his experiences with online education on smartphones, he stated,

Yeah... I face many problems when attending online education on a smartphone. Since my family belongs to a lower class, I could not afford a 5G SIM-enabled smartphone. Although I have a 4G smartphone, the Internet speed is slow in my location. Because of this, the video quality becomes very bad. Also, I cannot download PDFs and other files and store them on my phone as my phone's memory is small.

Income and Digital Divide

Their parents ' annual income is another factor affecting youth access to the Internet and other digital technologies.

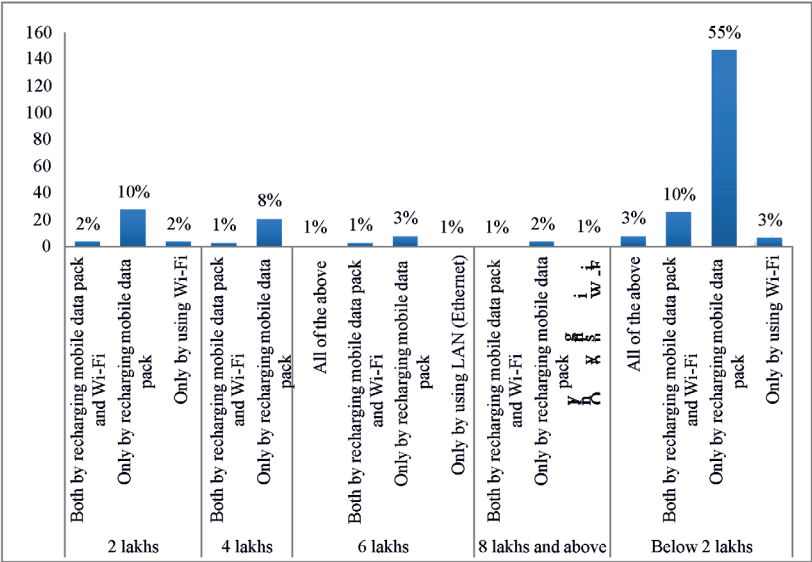


Figure 2. Parent's Income and youth access to the Internet

Source: Author's calculation from the online survey

Figure 2 shows that about 55% of youth's parents whose annual income is below 2 lakhs access the Internet through mobile data pack. Similarly, about 10 % of youth's parents whose annual income is 2 lakhs access the Internet through mobile data packs. Furthermore, 8% of youth's parents, whose annual income is 4 lakhs, only access the Internet using a mobile data pack. Within the annual income of 6 lakhs, about 3 % use the Internet by recharging mobile data packs. On the other hand, with an annual income of 8 lakh, about 2 % of people use mobile Internet packs.

Many participants whose parents' income is low narrate how they have to struggle to get mobile Internet packs for their smartphones. Dibya Kumari, 20 years old, is a student pursuing a B.Com. from Bongaigaon College describes how her family income makes it difficult for her to recharge her monthly Internet pack. She states,

I use the Internet only on my smartphone, using a mobile Internet data pack. At home, we have two smartphones, one my father uses and another I use. However, we still struggle to recharge monthly mobile Internet pack on time, as my father's income is very low. This affects my studies and other related work. Although my father has a shop and my mother is a housewife, I still struggle to recharge my Internet pack on time.

Furthermore, during the focus group discussion, one student narrated his story of being unable to access high-speed Internet daily due to his family's low income.

Interviewer: *How does your family income affect your access to the Internet?*

Participant 1: *Yeah... It does affect us in many ways. Although my father is a government employee, I have not faced any issues as such. However, I still do not have a Wi-Fi Router to access high-speed Internet at home. I only use the Internet on my smartphone by using a mobile recharge pack.*

Participant 2: *My father earns very little, so I face many problems. We have 2 siblings at home, and I am the one who goes to college. The other two siblings study in school. Since I am the elder one, my father gave me a smartphone to use for my studies at college. However, I face many problems, like being unable to recharge my phone on time and getting a minimum Internet pack, which affects high-speed Internet access.*

Occupation and Digital Divide

Similarly, parents' occupation is another socio-economic factor affecting youth access to the Internet. Figure 3 shows that among the business owners, about 16

% have access to only smartphones, whereas only 1 % have access to both laptops and smartphones. Among the farmers, about 34 % have access to smartphones. At the same time, only 1 % have access to laptops and smartphones. Similarly, among the government employees, about 14 % have access to smartphones, whereas 3 % have access to both laptops and smartphones. Among the manual labourers, about 13 % own smartphones, whereas only 1 % own laptops and smartphones. Also, among the shopkeepers, only 6 % own smartphones, whereas only 1 % own laptops and smartphones. Furthermore, about 8 % of the unemployed own smartphones, whereas only 1 % own laptops and smartphones.

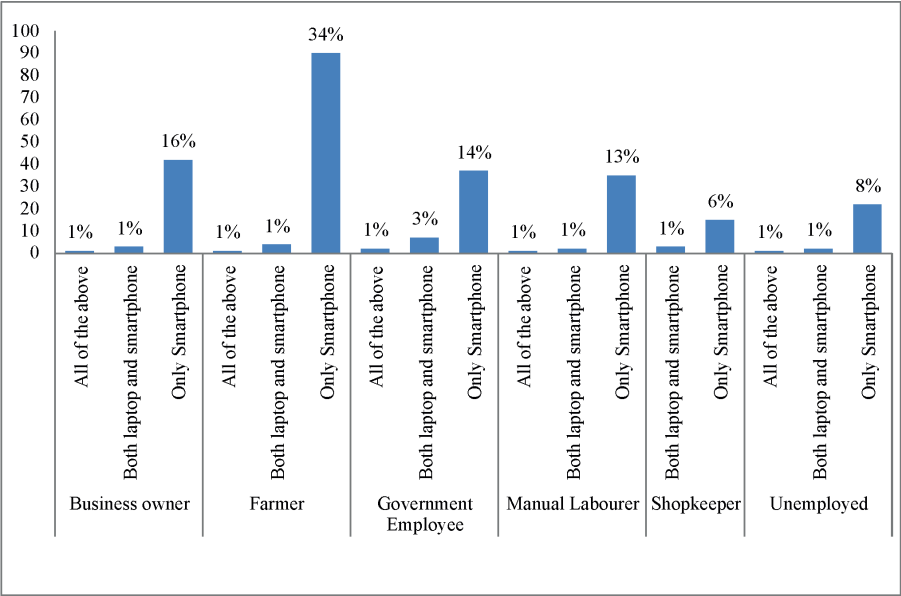


Figure 3: Parent’s Occupation and Access to various digital devices

Source: Author’s calculation from the online survey

Mithinga Brahma, 21 years old, B.A. student from Bijni College, describes his experience of not being able to own a laptop and how he has to depend only on a smartphone to access the Internet using a mobile Internet pack. His mother is a homemaker, while his father is an agricultural farmer. He also states he struggles to get good Internet speed as his village is near the Indo-Bhutan border of Chirang district in Assam. When I asked him what are the issues he faces in accessing the Internet, he stated,

I face many challenges daily. To access the Internet, I must use a mobile Internet pack on my smartphone. My father cannot afford a laptop and a good Wi-Fi router. My father is a farmer, so buying a laptop becomes difficult for us. Also, there is a frequent issue with Internet connectivity, as my home is near the Indo-Bhutan border. So, I have to struggle a lot to get good Internet speed.

DISCUSSION

The results indicate that socioeconomic status, profession, and income significantly influence youth uses of the Internet and digital technologies. Among the youth, social class therefore influences their uses and the possession of diverse digital devices and Internet. Class is one factor affecting youth access to the Internet. Social class affects a person's opportunities in many areas, including living conditions, medical care, and educational opportunities (Weber, 1978[1922]; Ragneeda, 2017). As discussed earlier, Weber (1978 [1922], p. 927) explained class as "several people have in common a specific causal component of their life chances". As Weber pointed out, one's place in the economic system is crucial.

Furthermore, findings also reveal the component of the middle class in accessing and using various digital technologies. Max Weber defined the middle class as those "who make a living from their property or their acquired skills" (Weber, 1978[1922], p. 303). On the contrary, Blagoev (2015, p.2789) argues that the concept of the middle class is always evolving and is shaped by many economic, social, moral, and political frameworks. Although Weber included characteristics like earnings and the capacity to manage economic assets in his definition of class, he did not limit it to one's connection to the means of production alone (Ragneeda, 2017). Thus, social status heavily influences all people's chances or possibilities to better their lives.

Similarly, the findings show that income is another factor that affects how youth access various digital technologies, particularly the Internet. For instance, Tsetsi and Rains's (2017) study indicates that smartphone use is disproportionately high among members of those with lower incomes, younger users, minority groups, and those with less education. Furthermore, findings also highlight how parents' occupation plays impacts youth access to the Internet. Disparities in social status reflect the uneven distribution of power and wealth resulting from social inequality. Uneven access to the Internet or

first level digital disparity results from this unequal division of assets (Ragneeda, 2017). The digital gap is deeply interconnected to socioeconomic status, since one's income level influences a person's capacity to acquire technological devices and the Internet. This divide usually reinforces or increases preexisting social stratification.

Occupation is another factor affecting youth's Internet access. Parycek et al.(2011) argue that people with high and low social status use the Internet differently. Compared to less privileged users, those with higher social statuses will likely enhance their capital while using the Internet. Similarly, Zillien & Hargittai's (2009) study on individual's online activities reveals how socioeconomic status impacts their access to and uses of the Internet. They argue that people of various social classes use the Internet in different ways. Such access to capital can be defined as digital capital (Ragnedda et al., 2020). Ragnedda et al. (2020) argue that digital capital is a tangible and intangible resource, the competencies that people, organisations and societies bring to bear to perform in and succeed in the digital world. In this context, Max Weber offered a deeper and more complicated view of how various groups encounter economic and social inequality by integrating power and status into his study of social stratification.

Thus, from his framework of social stratification, those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds often face difficulties while trying to use technology and the Internet. This contributes to societal inequalities, as individuals lacking access to the Internet and computers may be disadvantaged in terms of educational chances, opportunities for employment, and upward mobility. People from lower socioeconomic backgrounds have more challenges in progressing up the social ladder due to the digital disparity (Ragneeda, 2017; Van Dijk, 2005, 2020). Thus, reinforcing class inequities, individuals from lower socioeconomic backgrounds may have a harder time finding well-paying employment, getting the education they need, or participating in political conversations and decisions if they lack digital literacy and information access.

IN CONCLUSION

This article examines the digital divide among the youth in Assam. Using primary data and Max Weber's theory of social stratification, the article examines how social and economic status of the youth impacts their utilisation to various

technological devices and the Internet in Assam. The finding reveals that class, income, and occupation are the major components that impact youth access to the various technological devices and Internet. The findings also highlight how class category, income and occupation are interrelated aspects. As Van Dijk (2003, 2005) argues, the "digital divide is a complex phenomenon" which needs a multidimensional solution. Thus, utilising Max Weber's theory of social stratification, we can examine the influence of social and economic conditions among the youths and their access to the Internet. As shown in this article, the pre-existing social inequalities among the youth thus affect how they utilise and access various digital technologies in their everyday life, further leading to digital inequalities. Furthermore, in addition to increasing access to better technology and Internet connectivity, to eliminate the digital divide, it is also necessary to address the broader social inequalities that cause various individuals from lower socioeconomic status to have limited chances to use digital technologies and the Internet.

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